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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1478
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3176
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 0009
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6546
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4157
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0596
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0585
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2529
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0196
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 RANGOON 000235

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND PRM
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SUBJECT: BURMA'S VAST INTERNMENT CAMP: NORTHERN RAKHINE
STATE

REF: 226

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Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a country where everyone is oppressed by the military, some are treated worse than others. In general, the ethnic minorities are treated worse than the ethnic Burman majority, and non-Buddhists face more restrictions on their religious practices. Charge visited Northern Rakhine State January 25-27 with a group of other diplomats organized by UNHCR to learn why the international community in Burma agrees that the Muslims living in Northern Rakhine State are treated worst of all. Absent dramatic political changes, UNHCR presence there may be required indefinitely to ensure the basic survival of these people "of concern" living in the most miserable of circumstances--lacking freedom of movement, citizenship, and land. The current regime does not recognize these people as citizens, merely as residents. They are stateless. The district military commander and the district peace and development council have almost a blank check to control the Muslims as they see fit. The primary tactic they use is humiliation. We should provide humanitarian assistance in coordination with other donors and assist a local Muslim group addressing their educational needs. End Summary

GRIM CONDITIONS

¶2. (SBU) The Muslims of Northern Rakhine State (they call themselves Rohingyas, which the regime rejects, instead calling them Bengali-speaking Muslims) have been persecuted for more than 40 years. We visited the two townships where most of the Muslims are concentrated: Maungdaw (97% Muslim) and Buthidaung (95% Muslim). The previous dictator, Ne Win,

tried to force them from their native Rakhine lands in the 1960s. An estimated one million left, according to the Pakistani Ambassador, with many ending up in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, as well as neighboring Bangladesh. Many returned home in the 1970s, but then faced persecution again in 1977-78 when 500,000 fled to Bangladesh (again most returned) and the early 1990s when 350,000 left (and again most returned). Today, according to UN estimates, 850,000 people live in Northern Rakhine State (the three northernmost townships of Rakhine State bordering Bangladesh); over 90% are Muslim; over 50% are landless; and 80% are illiterate. Northern Rakhine State is the most densely populated rural area in Burma with 164 people/square kilometer compared to the national average of 74. Infant mortality is four times the national average (71 per 1000 births); 64% of children under five are chronically malnourished and stunted growth is common. Teachers are scarce as well with one for every 79 students vice the 1:40 national average.

13. (SBU) The combination of high population density and low productivity results in an annual rice deficit. In addition, rice prices are set higher than elsewhere in Burma to stem smuggling to Bangladesh. The World Food Program, the Food and Agriculture Organization and INGOs have tried to assist with alternative crops suitable for dry season cultivation. The landless depend on seasonal work, primarily rice cultivation from June-December. 80% are illiterate with few marketable skills. The scarcity of work and rice becomes most pronounced from March-May. Government restrictions on freedom of movement of people and goods hamper trade.

14. (SBU) Most of the last group of refugees returned a decade ago, and now only a few of the estimated 20,000 refugees remaining in Bangladesh trickle back (210 returned in 2004 and 92 returned in 2005). The remaining refugees

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retain the option of returning, but UNHCR does not encourage them to return. UNHCR has shifted from providing resettlement assistance to providing protection. It regards all of the Muslims in these three townships as "of concern" due to their miserable circumstances and lack of legal status. One UNHCR rep working in Northern Rakhine State said he did not mind the isolation or separation from his family, but found the sense of hopelessness hardest to handle. UNHCR representatives described the environment as one of their most difficult anywhere because they have no agreement with the authorities on basic standards and no laws.

NO FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

15. (SBU) To guard this "vast internment camp" the military has stationed 8000 soldiers and customs and immigration officials at 108 locations manning 50 checkpoints. This makes it difficult for the people to access health clinics, schools and other programs set up by NGOs to provide basic services and training. Permission to leave the townships is even harder. A local professional with UNHCR said his daughter won prizes for being the top student in her high school, but was not allowed to travel outside the township to sit for university exams. His son had faced the same situation and chose to go to Bangladesh for a university education; now his son does not plan to return. Muslims interested in working with UNHCR must be willing to sacrifice their freedom of movement. Even though they are not subject to these restrictions in Rangoon where they have long lived with their families, once they go to Northern Rakhine State to work for UNHCR, they too lose their freedom of movement. UNHCR will intervene to give these employees opportunities to visit their families, but again it depends on the whims of the local authorities.

LITTLE EDUCATION

16. (SBU) Based on the large numbers of children we saw out of school, the majority of children do not attend public

schools. Madrassahs have been set up in many villages to provide some education to boys; girls generally receive the least education. We met with a group of women who had formed a microlending program. When asked what they would do with additional income earned, they said they would send another child to school, with boys given precedence. The women estimated annual school fees at the equivalent of \$20. Several of the women had one or two children in school, but they also noted that they had a total of 5-7 children. The one school we visited had 380 students in one extended classroom and only two teachers. The day we visited, the students were receiving their monthly allocation of 20 pounds of rice from the World Food Program. World Food Program estimates their school feeding program has achieved a 300 percent increase in school attendance, reaching 87,000 students. Many of the NGO-run health centers have day care facilities attached to provide meals and some instruction to pre-school aged children.

FORCED LABOR, FORCED RELOCATIONS, and FORCED CONTRIBUTIONS

17. (SBU) With half the population and 90 percent of the returnees landless, the people become more vulnerable to demands for forced labor and forced contributions. The forced labor can vary from carrying loads for government officials, standing sentry duty on the major paths around the villages to report any outsiders without approvals, repairing roads, and anything else an official feels entitled to demand of the population. The UNHCR reports that the number of forced labor complaints have declined since the peak in 2001,

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with 80 filed in 2005. UNHCR representatives said that they would intervene even without a complaint where they note "high levels" of forced labor. Rape is less common than in other ethnic areas, according to UNHCR representatives.

18. (SBU) All land in Burma is owned by the state with a system of land tenancy. The landless farm as sharecroppers, with the shares depending on the goodwill of the individual with land tenancy rights. In keeping with the divide and rule tactics used throughout the country, the authorities have coopted the elite by giving some land tenancy rights. Nevertheless, both the landless and those with land tenancy rights have no appeal should authorities arbitrarily revoke their land rights. Usually they are forced from their traditional land as the authorities move in ethnic Burmans and ethnic Rakhines. In one case, the authorities populated a model village with urban criminals released from prison. The authorities provided the released criminals with large homes with metal roofs and electricity along with substantial farmland on the condition that they live in Northern Rakhine State. The authorities then told the criminals that they could make the Muslims work their lands.

19. (SBU) The Muslims in Rakhine face additional demands. For instance, since there are relatively few Buddhists in the region, the authorities force Muslims to build Buddhist temples and monasteries, while denying them permission to make repairs to their mosques. The Muslims of Northern Rakhine do not face pressures to join the regime's mass member organization, the United Solidarity and Development Association, since they are not regarded as citizens. However, they still must contribute plastic chairs, or the cash equivalent, to USDA for their rallies.

DAILY HUMILIATION

10. (SBU) The Muslims must request permission to travel from one village to another, to marry, to improve their homes, and to do anything else the authorities can think of. These permits usually also require payment of a fee. Women must register their pregnancies. The procedures change frequently and largely depend on the whim of the approving authority keeping the Muslims confused and becoming a costly burden. UNHCR will intervene when the demands become too egregious.

For instance, to reduce birth rates, the authorities in 2005 decided to stop granting approval for marriages until UNHCR intervened. Then some local authorities imposed a new rule that they would approve marriages, but the prospective groom would have to submit a photo with no beard, contrary to his religious practices, with his application.

¶11. (SBU) While we saw new Buddhist temples and monasteries throughout the area (mostly built with forced labor), the majority of the mosques were crumbling. One mosque had salvaged metal siding randomly tacked up for walls. Crumbling thatched roofs covering the mosques were common. A mosque in the center of Maungdaw town had been converted to a fire station by the authorities. The authorities usually deny permission to repair mosques, but occasionally one might be permitted. After the repairs are made, according to UNHCR reps, just to humiliate the people and show who's in charge, the authorities sometimes claim that the work went beyond the permit and order it all dismantled.

INTERNATIONAL REACTION

¶12. (U) This trip also provided an overview of the international programs to assist the people of Northern Rakhine State. The UNHCR has the lead among the UN agencies

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here and works through international NGOs (INGOs) to provide Burmese language training to women to decrease their marginalization and to children so that they can enroll in school, health care, skills development for the most vulnerable populations, income generation and financial self-help for the most vulnerable. The INGOs operating in Northern Rakhine State include: Action Contre la Faim (nutrition program), Aide Medicale Internationale (primary health care in Buthidaung township, but running into problems with local authorities because their clinics are more popular than public health clinics), Bridge Asia Japan (basic rural infrastructure), CARE Australia (agro-forestry, including securing land rights to sloping land), Community and Family Services International (community services and language training), Groupe de Recherche et d'Echanges Technologiques (agricultural production), Malteser (primary health care in Maungdaw Township with good working relations with local authorities; training community health workers), Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland (malaria, TB, HIV/AIDS preventions). The major donors are the European Commission/European Union, Japan, Australia, Germany, UAE, and Norway.

¶13. (C) More dispiriting has been the reaction of others from whom we expected more sympathy:

Bangladesh: The Ambassador participated in this visit. Although he acknowledged the terrible conditions, he found conditions in some ways better than in Bangladesh. "In Bangladesh people have a state, but no land; here they have no state, but land to farm." He made clear his primary concern is that the Northern Rakhine Muslims do not return to Bangladesh.

Pakistan: The Ambassador participated in this visit. He provided historical background on how Pakistan had tried to help in the past, but did not offer to do anything more than wring his hands now. He whispered that the U.S. must speak out about this, and could not respond when asked why Pakistan did not speak out. He subsequently thanked Charge for asking the District Officer, a Lt. Col and the most senior official we met, about lifting restrictions on freedom of movement.

Singapore: The Ambassador participated in this visit and coined the best description: a vast internment camp. When asked why other Muslim nations did not speak out, he said they all have problems with minorities, who claim some separateness, citing the example of the Kurds. If these nations highlighted the plight of the Rohingyas, then they would, at a minimum, look hypocritical, for not addressing

the demands of minority groups in their own countries.

India: The Ambassador and DCM both agreed that the situation was inhumane, but they professed greater concern that the Rohingyas would become terrorists, saying we should focus our attention there, rather than trying to improve their plight.

Saudi Arabia: They have just opened an Embassy in Rangoon. The Saudi Charge made clear that the primary goal of this Embassy is to repatriate 120,000 Rohingyas living without documents in Saudi Arabia for many years. They had entered Saudi Arabia on Pakistan and Bangladesh passports, but those countries refused to renew them. Charge asked if he realized that sending them back would effectively mean sending them to prison. He acknowledged that the timing might not be right, but that the situation in Burma might improve in the future. When asked about the relatively small number of Rohingyas in comparison with other overseas workers in Saudi Arabia (he rattled off: 1 million each from Egypt and Pakistan, 900,000 from Indonesia, 400,000 from the Philippines), he replied

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that the others all had passports.

Burmese political activists in exile whom Charge met February 13: After proudly describing their efforts to develop a constitution in consultation with representatives of various ethnic groups, Charge asked about the provisions they had made for the Muslims of Northern Rakhine State. The first response: they are not citizens. They disputed Charge's assertion that these people had been living in that area for hundreds of years. Finally they admitted to an agreement with the Arakans (a Buddhist ethnic group inhabiting the rest of Rakhine State), that the Muslims would not have the right to a separate state, but that they would be accorded individual rights.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) The Rohingyas are a small group of oppressed people in a country full of many oppressed people. The others have received more attention because their plight has made it to the international press. The military has effectively sealed the Rohingyas off from the world and keeps them at the bare subsistence level-it is an internment camp. The international community, with the UNHCR in the lead, has responded to enable these people to survive-just. If international donors disappeared, the fate of these people would be far worse. Their only hope for better lives is a government willing to accord them basic rights of citizenship and freedom. The current government essentially acts as prison guards. We should not assume that any future democratic government will accord these people their basic human rights, but should insist on it. In the meantime, we should join other donors in providing humanitarian assistance to the Rohingyas and send the message to the military that we will not permit their elimination. We also recommend support for efforts by the Islamic Center in Rangoon to start an English language program in Northern Rakhine State (reftel).

VILLAROSA